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ABSTRACT

This article, a reply to William Gage's "Uncommonly Taught Languages" (ED 042 163), takes issue with Gage's assertion that "there is no generally recognized source of guidance for determining needs and priorities for the allocation of the scarce resources in the uncommonly taught languages, but...that a number of useful tools of access for many languages had nevertheless accidentally surfaced." The author of the present article, who is Chief of the Language and Area Research Section of the Institute of International Studies of the U.S. Office of Education, believes, to the contrary, that a great deal has been achieved since the passing of the National Defense Act in 1958 and that "most of that portion financed by the Office of Education has come about more by design that by accident, and the trend of recent years has clearly been to target in ever more sharply on priority needs in the language field." The author then proceeds to comment on and respond to specific points in Gage's article, stressing thoughout the role of the Office of Education in such activities as the preparation of a data-base for the uncommonly taught languages and the sponsoring of overseas language training centers. Newly developing trends in the field are also discussed. (FWB)

SPECIAL REPORT NUMBER 6

UNCOMMONLY TAUGHT LANGUAGES: ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE[1]

By Richard T. Thompson

(The author, who is the Chief of the Language and Area Research Section of the Institute of International Studies, U.S. Office of Education, was invited to contribute his comments on the Teaching of Uncommon Languages in the United States, a subject reviewed by William Gage and Carleton Hodge in separate articles published in Bulletin number 17. It is hoped that the views offered by these three qualified scholars will provide the ERIC audience with a well rounded picture of this important area within the language sciences.)

The September 1970 issue of the ERIC Bulletin contained an article by William Gage on the uncommonly taught languages suggesting that there is no generally recognized source of guidance for determining needs and priorities for the allocation of scarce resources, but concluded that a number of useful tools of access for many languages had nevertheless accidentially surfaced.

It is the purpose of this author to provide another look at the territory covered by Dr. Gage and present what is believed to be a more accurate perspective. The basic thesis of this article is that while a great deal has been achieved since 1958, most of that portion financed by the Office of Education has come about more by design than by accident and the trend of recent years has clearly been to target in ever more sharply on priority needs in the language field. This view grows out of the writer's major responsibility for funding foreign language research in the United States Office of Education. From this vantage point I will comment on Dr. Gage's view of trends and events -- amplifying where necessary -- and suggesting others newly developing. It is appropriate that both articles were published by CAL, for CAL has been an active participant in many of the Office of Education's efforts which are cited below.

In order to correct imbalances in American education in 1958, Congress passed the National Defense Education Act. Title VI of this act provided for the establishment of (a) foreign language and area centers in cooperation with American institutions of higher learning, (b) fellowships (NDFL's) to enable students to study these languages and areas, and (c) research funds to prepare the language teaching materials necessary to carry out the first two objectives.

Since NDEA was enacted, $45 million has been allocated for the establishment and maintenance of 107 language and area centers; $53 million has provided for 17,000 fellowships; and nearly $30 million has been devoted to the preparation of specialized materials in 141 languages including some 110 basic courses, 60 readers, 40 dictionaries, 50 grammars, in addition to surveys and basic research on language and language learning.[2]

In the early days of NDEA, little information was available on the uncommonly taught languages, fewer specialists were trained in these languages and almost no tools of access existed. In a matrix characterized by so many gaps, almost any effort was useful. Realizing the need for guidance, the Office of Education early sought out the leading experts in the country, first to assess the materials needs in their areas of specialization, and then to draw up a list of uncommonly taught languages, classifying them by degrees of importance. The latter conference produced the well-known Fife-Nielsen Report. Subsequent surveys up-dated this information resulting in several recent OE supported activities mentioned by Gage in other connections.

1. Realizing the importance of developing a data-base for decision making in the seventies, O.E.'s Institute of International Studies (IIS), in cooperation with the Social Science Research Council, funded comprehensive surveys of (a) language and area centers; (b) individual competencies of members of the six area professional associations; (c) former graduate students; and (d) present graduate students.

Gage refers to the newly formed Council of Executive Secretaries of Area Associations as an outgrowth of the above surveys. He fails to note that it was precisely the Office of Education, through funds made available by the

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NDEA Language and Area Research Section, that helped stimulate the creation of the Council, and that it was originally formed specifically to serve in an advisory capacity in the development of the surveys. It is still too early to evaluate the role the Council will play in the future, but it should be pointed out that the Association for Asian Studies has recently organized several language committees in support of the Regional Councils of the Association. It would appear that these committees will prove useful in helping provide continuing guidance in this area.

2. In another recent attempt to seek out up-to-date information and guidance from the academic community, IIS supported a Conference on English Bilingual Dictionaries at the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL). The purpose of the Conference was two-fold: To present a status study of bilingual dictionaries--needs and problems; and to attempt to up-date the Fife-Nielsen Report.

In 1967, after some eight years of Title VI, the gaps were becoming filled and the matrix was inverted. For a selective list of high-priority languages, there were more basic language access materials completed than remained to be done. During these years other government agencies--the Peace Corps, Foreign Service Institute (FSI), Defense Language Institute (DLI) -- as well as commercial sectors were also busy preparing basic tools of access with little or no coordination. Where materials already existed they were often dismissed as being irrelevant to the goal-specific teaching situations of the individual agencies. In 1969, Robert Leestma, Associate Commissioner for International Education at OE, charged the Research Section with improving coordination and trying to stimulate cooperative program planning as one of its most urgent priorities. The reduction in funds in many Federal programs made it all the more imperative that duplication be avoided and cooperative efforts be developed to ensure needed progress on the full range of priorities in the field. IIS adopted a two-phase plan.

3. First, to develop a sound data-base, IIS contracted with CAL to prepare a survey of materials for the study of neglected languages. This survey attempted to include all available teaching materials deemed minimally acceptable for general use. For each text a descriptive paragraph examines goals and methods. The survey revealed that in many cases duplicate sets of teaching materials existed (one notable example is Chinese Mandarin). This survey has been published by and is available at CAL.

4. Second, IIS hosted a meeting of the Inter-Agency Language Roundtable in 1969. Coordination of language research and development was the theme. An important outgrowth of this meeting is an on-going U.S.O.E. sponsored research project with Earl Stevick of FSI as principal investigator. The project hopes, on the one hand, to develop formulae for adapting existing materials designed for other purposes and goals to new teaching situations, while, on the other, developing guidelines for preparing new courses more along the lines of basic resource materials of widely generalizable utility, rather than the highly goal-specific texts currently under development.

5. Gage refers to the 1968 MLA Foreign Language enrollment survey. As part of OE's continuing assessment of the status and needs of language studies, the IIS Research Section conducts biennial surveys on foreign language enrollments under contract with MLA. Preliminary results as of November 1970 indicate that, while enrollments in the commonly taught languages are generally down, the picture is quite the opposite in the neglected languages with enrollments up significantly over 1968. This year the survey will also gather data on degree requirements--invaluable for future manpower planning. Since NDEA is primarily concerned with the neglected languages, any significant increase in enrollments in such languages, resulting from the general drop in language requirements, should be met by the appropriate allocation of fellowships for the languages reflecting the greatest increases.

6. The Office of Education demonstrated a clear interest in developing basic demographic and linguistic information on the languages of the world as early as the late fifties, when a file was set up at George Washington University. It was later transferred to Indiana University where it is presently located. Recognizing that only an internationally-sponsored cooperative approach to the languages of the world could hope to bring the problem into sharp focus and develop a satisfactory long-range plan of attack, the Language Research Section of IIS supported a preliminary National Planning Conference on the Languages of the World at the Center for Applied Linguistics. This National Conference took place in April, 1970 and was followed by an International Conference on the Languages of the World in Austria in August, 1970. Results will be reported in the Linguistic Reporter.

7. In addition to the above activities carried out by IIS, numerous other planning conferences and research activities provide OE with expert guidance and evaluation of resources, needs, and priorities in various fields of foreign language and area studies. A good example is the survey of Language and Area Studies: East Central and Southeastern Europe, which was done under the auspices of the American Council of Learned Societies. This survey is an important contribution toward pointing the direction of research and training in this rapidly developing field.[3]

8. Gage stresses the increasing availability of linguistic expertise in many foreign countries and the opportunities for joint research. The Office endorses this approach and in the last year initiated special new programs to promote joint research between foreign and U.S. institutions in countries where U.S.-owned foreign currencies are available. These programs are broadly conceived so as to permit research on area studies as well as language and linguistics. However, it should be noted that joint research on language and languages materials has always been possible under the OE programs, but the interest on the part of the academic community has not been very great.

9. An OE-supported study of foreign language proficiency skills by John Carroll in 1967 concluded that "time spent abroad is clearly one of the most potent variables we have found [to predict proficiency]."[4] Preliminary results from the SSRC study reveal that over 90% of the returns on the individual competencies survey recommend increased language study abroad.

In response to these research conclusions and recommendations OE adopted a leadership role in initiating a new category of advanced language training centers abroad. These programs take advantage of PL 480 funds in countries where available, and include the following programs:

a. United Arabic Republic - Tunisia - Morocco. In 1966, OE, in cooperation with the University of California, Berkeley and the American University of Cairo established the Center for Arabic Studies Abroad (CASA). Berkeley represents a consortium of nine universities including Harvard, Portland State, Princeton, UCLA, Chicago, Michigan, Pennsylvania and Texas. This program provides for the single most important language training center abroad for Arabic. Courses in Modern Standard as well as Classical Arabic are offered both during the academic year and the summer. This author had the opportunity to evaluate the Center this past summer and found a vigorous, effective program.

OE has received proposals for the support of programs in Tunisia and Morocco for the summer of 1971. These, if funded, could add a new dimension to the study of Arabic in countries where PL 480 funds are available.

b. Poland

USOE supported academic year programs at Poznan and Krakow in cooperation with the University of Kansas and Alliance College beginning in 1969. A summer program in Poznan is proposed for 1971 by Kansas.

c. Yugoslavia

In 1967, IIS supported an academic year and summer advanced language training program for Serbo-Croation in cooperation with Portland State University and Zagreb Institute. IIS is also considering a proposal for advanced language study in Belgrade.

d. India

In 1968, USOE assisted the establishment of a program in New Delhi under the auspices of the American Institute of Indian Studies. Whereas initially the program limited its offerings to courses in Hindi/Urdu, there is strong indication that Marathi and Tamil will be introduced this year. IIS is presently reviewing a proposal to send students to the Central Institute of Hindi at Agra in the summer of 1971. In addition to Hindi, tutorials will be offered in Malayalam, Bengali, and Kannada, among others.

e. Pakistan

A summer program is also being planned in Pakistan in cooperation with Columbia and Duke Universities for the teaching of Urdu and possibly Bengali.

f. With regard to the languages of Africa, a proposal for the study of Susu and Fula in Guinea was also received.

g. Advanced language training centers abroad in non-PL 480 countries also having received OE support include: Perisan (summer 1970) in Iran; Russian (1968,69,70) in Leningrad; Chinese (academic year 1970-71) in Taipei; and Japanese (academic year 1970-71) in Tokyo. The latter two are inter-University programs operated by Stanford.

10. Information Flow in Languages and Linguistics

In 1966, the Office of Education, under NDEA, Title VI established two clearinghouses: The MLA Clearinghouse in Modern Foreign Languages; and the CAL Clearinghouse on Neglected Languages and Linguistics. These clearinghouses have provided an invaluable source of information for and about the language teaching profession. In addition to archival responsibilities, developments in the field are reported on in special reports and annual bibliographies are prepared. This Bulletin and the State of the Art papers Gage refers to are also commissioned by ERIC.

11. I see three important trends for the seventies.

- Some shift in emphasis from text development toward research into second language acquisition theory. We have reached the stage

in the development of language teaching materials where we not only see the light at the end of the tunnel, but can plot the steps required to get there. Furthermore, whereas in the past OE's language research program responded more largely to unsolicited proposals from the field, now, as greater numbers of experts are completing their training at language and area centers, it is becoming increasingly possible to target research to fill the remaining gaps.

In paragraph 2, I alluded to the fact that more materials were completed than remained to be done. To suggest that linguistic research and the development of language teaching materials will ever be completed is to mis-read the development of linguistic theory and language change. This view is also supported by a rapidly developing methodology-oriented teaching profession characterized by change, indecision, and uncertainty.

Paradoxically, in spite of and because of the above reasons, language teaching materials cannot continue to be completely rewritten on the grounds that they reflect outdated linguistic theories, exhibit tokens of earlier styles of language, or reflect upopular teaching methodologies. The implications of the above are that we must become more learning oriented and less teaching oriented.[5]

Justifications for text development often stress more effective presentation of language based upon improved teaching methods. The sad fact is that in the absence of empirical evidence on how language is acquired, we cannot possibly pretend we know how to teach it. The format of a text, the sequencing of the linguistic structures, and intensity of presentation still remain in no small part beyond our present understanding. It is imperative that increasing amounts of available resources be allocated to research of this kind. Success in this area may well depend upon the following pre-requisites.

- Development of case-studies.

The language teaching profession--and this means the language teachers as well as the researchers--must follow the lead of the medical profession in establishing detailed "linguistic files" or "case histories" on individual language learners. Responsibility for development of the form lies with the researcher, while its implementation remains with the teacher. Only after significant amounts of data have been gathered, computerized, and analyzed can we hope to draw any meaningful conclusions.

- Development of Criterion-Referenced Testing Devices.

The question of what it is to know a language is not yet well understood, and consequently, the language proficiency tests now available--and there are few for the uncommonly taught languages--are inadequate because they attempt to measure something that has not been well defined. There is increasing recognition by the field of the need to develop absolute or criterion-referenced tests, and that these tests should relate in some meaningful way to native speaker competence and performance--to specific behavioral objectives.

Until adequate testing devices are made available on a national scale to researchers and teachers, research on effective learning and teaching strategies will remain largely theoretical for lack of adequate empirical validation through appropriate measurement.

Certainly, the development of proficiency tests for the uncommonly taught languages will become increasingly necessary as more and more students vie for the limited support for advanced language study both at home and, especially, in training centers abroad. General demands for accountability in education will sift down to the language teaching profession and provide an added impetus for the development of these tests.

FOOTNOTES

1. This article was written by Richard T. Thompson in his private capacity. No official support or endorsement by the United States Office of Education is intended or should be inferred.

2. See Completed Research, Studies, and Instructional Materials for Language Development, List No. 6 compiled by Julia A. Petrov for a complete listing. It can be obtained by writing Superintendent of Documents, Catalog No. FS 5.212:12016-69, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402.

3. Charles Jelavich edited the Language and Area Studies: East Central and Southeastern Europe; a Survey. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969.

4. John E. Carroll, "Foreign Language Proficiency Levels Attained by Language Majors Near Graduation from College," Foreign Language Annals, Vol. I (Dec. 1967), 137.

5. Growing interest in self-instructional programs similar to the OE supported Boyd-Bowman Program at SUNY Buffalo mentioned by Gage support a movement toward learning oriented materials.